Calico Mountains Complex

History and Report on Outcomes and Complications for Horses Adapting to Hay

From 12/28/2009 to 2/01/2010 approximately 1,646 horses from the Calico Mountain Complex of HMAs have been received at the Indian Lakes contract holding facility in Fallon. Eighteen horses have died or have been euthanized as acts of mercy because they were not adapting to being fed grass hay in a domestic setting. These horses ranged in age from 12 to 20 years and had Henneke body condition scores from 2 to 3. The horses that were euthanized were losing weight and condition and were incapable of maintaining a Henneke body condition equal to or greater than three. These horses came off the range in poor condition and were most likely eating brush (woody shrubs) because of the lack of preferred grass forage on overgrazed rangelands.

Upon arrival horses are fed a mixture of grass hays (some orchard grass, some rye grass). They have free choice access to this ration and can eat one or any combination of grass they choose. Initially some hay is scattered in the pen near the water trough until horses are used to eating from a feed bunk. Most horses adapt well to this ration. It is as close to a diet of range grass as any hay that we can find. A small percentage of

horses do not make the transition from range forage, especially if they have been eating brush, to a domestic diet of hay but most make the transition without serious complications. The few horses that have not adapted to this domestic ration are primarily older, poor body condition pregnant females. The horses that died were in body condition 2-3 and aged 12-20 years.

After 2 – 4 weeks alfalfa hay is added to the grass ration to increase protein and energy in the ration for horses that are doing well. These changes help the horses regain weight and condition they may have been lacking when gathered. Alfalfa hay is a good choice for horses, makes it possible to provide a consistent diet between BLM facilities across the country and is the one most likely to be fed by potential adopters.

The horses that have trouble adapting to feed typically show inappetance (lack of appetite), loose manure, weight loss and pregnancy loss. Hyperlipemia develops when remaining fat stores are broken down as the body tries to maintain energy levels. Treatment offered is free choice hay, minimal competition for feed, free choice electrolyte fortified water and plain water.

Many horses recover following this regimen. Some horses will have miscarriages and then recover. The miscarriage reduces the energy demand on the metabolism of the mare.

The cause of death for the small percentage of mares that do not recover is typically kidney and liver failure secondary to hyperlipemia and general metabolic failure.

I hope this helps explain the possible outcomes for horses that have been recently gathered from the range, have trouble adapting to hay in a domestic setting and the factors that affect those outcomes.

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